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ABSTRACT

Botswana's national literacy program and its role in both democracy building and national development efforts is discussed in this paper. Literacy groups can be found in villages and towns throughout the country. The proportion of literate adults has increased from 34% in 1966 to 68.9% in 1993. Yet the absence of 81% of the eligible population brings into question its ability to attract participants. Participation is a poor contender to the other demands placed upon Botswana's adults due to their everyday struggle to feed themselves and their families. Based upon an 18-month ethnographic study of literacy in Botswana, the paper describes the supports provided by the national program and the everyday practices of learners and non-learners. Discrepancies between structure and local meaning have resulted in the interruption of existing social positions and divisions of labor. Reasons for the discrepancies are examined. Analysis of the program across gender, ethnic , and geographic lines identifies places where adult learners have been able to find safety, inspiration, and guidance. However, it is noted that the literacy program does not provide skills beyond decoding text, and does not help adults become upwardly mobile. Speaking to relationships among adult education, empowerment, and social transformation, the paper focuses on why the program has not been more effective in educating Botswana's citizens. Contains 18 references. (BT)

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# Seeing the Light: Literacy Education and Citizenship in Botswana.

by Frances Julia Riemer

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Abstract

**"Seeing the Light: Literacy Education and Citizenship in Botswana"**

"Literacy is very useful. I'm already seeing the light."
(adult literacy learner, Botswana)

Botswana is an unusually successful example of post-colonial African democracy and development. Its post-colonial tradition of multi-party elections has been commended internationally, and its development strategies have pulled the country's per capita income from one of the world's 20 poorest in 1966 to a level that in 1988 surpassed all Asian and African countries outside Japan. The country's adult education efforts, in the form of its literacy program, have had a curious relationship with these national endeavors. While not implemented until 14 years after independence, and never an explicit part of Botswana's development strategies, the nation-wide adult literacy effort was nonetheless created within a tradition of beliefs that have been called "the economic magic of literacy," and the literacy program itself has been consistenly framed by government officials as a vehicle to uplift the populace.

On the surface, Botswana's national literacy program is a sure success. Literacy groups can be found in small villages, large villages, and towns throughout the country, and due at least in some part to the program's efforts, the proportion of literate adults has increased from 34% in 1966 to 68.9% in 1993 (Kann and Taylor 1988; Central Statistics Office 1996). Yet the absence of 81% of the eligible population from the program brings to light questions concerning the program's ability to attract participants, and suggests that participation is a poor contender to the many other demands placed upon Botswana's adults in their everyday struggles to feed themselves and their families.

The paper looks at Botswana's literacy program and its role in both democracy building and national development efforts. Based upon a 18-month ethnographic study of literacy in Botswana, the paper describes both the supports provided by the national literacy program and the everyday practices of learners and non-learners, and examines why discrepancies between structure and local meaning have resulted in a national initiative incapable of interrupting existing social positions and divisions of labor. By analyzing the program across gender, ethnic, and geographic lines, the paper also identifies places where adult learners have been able to find safety, inspiration, and guidance within the larger, less responsive structure of the country-wide initiative.

In Botswana, adult learners talk about "moving from darkness," and the paper illustrates that a few dedicated teachers have been able to provide a community for their adult learners. For most adults however, the ability to "see the light" does little more than provide skills to decode text. It does not help them become upwardly mobile, gain political consciousness, access additional resources, or even participate in the formal educational system. Speaking directly to relationships among adult education, empowerment, and social transformation, the paper focuses on why the program hasn't been more effective in educating Botswana's citizens. Its analysis of Botswana's national

literacy program provides evidence that empowerment is not an accidental by-product of educational efforts, and that despite best intentions, in this small south African country, education and empowerment have not been synonymous. The paper concludes, however, on a promising note. By contrasting a macro-level examination of individuals' practice both in and outside literacy classes, the paper argues that if marginalized individuals, the poor, the illiterate, women, are to be empowered through an investment in adult education, empowerment must be deliberate and integral to the program's structure, curriculum, and pedagogy.

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**"Seeing the Light: Literacy Education and Citizenship in Botswana "**

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"Literacy is very useful. I'm already seeing the light."

(adult literacy learner)

"We know how to read and write. We have therefore moved from the darkness."

(song composed by adult literacy class)

The southern African country of Botswana provides a compelling context in which to study the veracity of the *literacy doctrine*, a term used by Coombs (1985: 265) to describe the broad-based belief that "learning the mechanics of reading and writing was the touchstone that could liberate poor and uneducated people everywhere from the bonds of ignorance, disease, and hunger." In Botswana that conviction has been part of the legacy of 19th century Christian missionaries, who were sent to southern Africa by the London Missionary Society to spread the word of God (Sillery 1974; Colclough and McCarthy 1980; Picard 1985). After all, Robert Moffatt, the leader of these proselytizing forays into Africa, both provided the first transliteration of the Tswana language into Roman alphabet and translated the Bible into written Setswana. But in Botswana the *literacy doctrine* is also a manifestation of a focus on human capital that has taken hold in the larger post-World War II international community. To quote Wagner (1987: 11), "Since World War II perhaps the most compelling argument for human resources development is that literacy and schooling will lead to economic growth in countries which are able to make a sufficient investment." Literacy itself has long been positioned as a general social good, "an essential requirement ... needed to help ordinary people play their full part in [the] national development," in a country undergoing what anthropologists call an *accelerated acculturation process* (Morake 1979:6). One example of the increased role of literacy in Botswana's rapid development is its relationship to the measurement and manipulation of wealth. In an economy in which cattle are key, possessing a large herd has always been a sign of wealth. With one foot in the village and the other in town, many Batswana continue to calculate personal wealth by the number of cattle they own, but now they depend upon automated teller machines to access cash.

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Unlike many African nation states, Botswana has been in the unusual position of being able "to make a sufficient investment" in both literacy education and schooling. A remarkably successful example of post-colonial African development, Botswana's discovery of vast mineral wealth just two years after independence, its profitable partnership with DeBeers (the international diamond consortium), combined with a multi-party democracy, sparse population of only 1.4 million people, and stable political climate have pulled the country's per capital income from one of the world's lowest in 1966 to a level that in 1988 surpassed all Asian and African countries outside of Japan (Colclough and McCarthy 1980; Stedman 1993). To build the expertise the country required post-colonalism and to localize administrative positions then occupied by expatriate experts, Botswana's central government pursued a strategy of human capital development, constructing primary and secondary schools and expanding access to tertiary education (Parson 1985). The country's adult education efforts, in the form of its literacy program, have had an interesting and often confounding relationship with the economic miracle. While not implemented until 1980, a full 14 years after independence, and never an explicit part of the country's development strategies, the nation-wide adult literacy effort has nonetheless been framed by government officials as a vehicle to uplift the populace. And in an often cited speech delivered during one of the pivotal meetings on the eradication of illiteracy in Botswana in 1979, the current Minister of Education, K.P. Morake, stated:

> For the great majority of the people, if life in modern society is to be lived to the full, they must be released from the bondage of illiteracy if they are to make their best contribution to their families, their communities, and their nation. (Meisenhelder 1992: 8).

The literacy program's materials, a series of five primers with lessons built around Paolo Freire's concept of key words, manifest a similar conviction in their titles of "Go Bala Ke Tswelelopele" ("In reading, I progress") and "Re Feng Lesedi La Thuto, Re Bone, Re Tshele," ("Give us the light of education, then we can see and live"). Adult learners have also adopted the metaphor of light in talking about their own learning and personal development. "Literacy is very useful. I'm already seeing the light," asserted one adult literacy learner. And from a song composed by adult literacy class, "We know how to read and write. We have therefore moved from the darkness." By examining what "moving from darkness" means to adults in Botswana and how it translates to their everyday practice, this paper uses the experience of Botswana's National Literacy Programme (NLP) to address the role of literacy education in empowering the country's citizens "to make their best contribution to their families, their communities, and their nation."

On the surface, Botswana's national literacy program is clearly a success. Literacy groups can be found in small and large villages and towns throughout the country. In 1995 they served

12,387 adult learners (4475, or 36% were men and 7912 or 64% were women) and subsidized 739 literacy teachers, who are officially titled Literacy Group Leaders (LGLs). Seven hundred and seven, or 96% of the LGLs, are women (Legwaila 1996). Through their efforts, as well as through the increased access to elementary and secondary schools that the country's development effors afforded, the country's literacy rate has increased from 34% in 1981 to 68.9% in 1993 (Central Statistics Office, 1996; Kann and Taylor 1988)[1]. Yet despite the country's investments in human capital, its increase in literacy rates, low foreign debt, high cash reserves, and an official World Bank ranking of *Middle Income*[2], poverty in Botswana has increased and wealth and socioeconomic opportunities remain unequally distributed across gender and geography (World Bank 1996; Stedman, 1993). Forty seven percent of the country's population continues to fall below the poverty line. Households in rural areas and those headed by women remain far on the margins of the country's economic miracle. (BIDPA 1997).

These discrepancies framed an 18-month ethnographic study of everyday literacy practice in Botswana and the organizational support provided to adults in Botswana by the country's literacy program. Conducted in 1995, 1996, and with a return field visit scheduled for the summer of 1998, data has been gathered across three different geographic sites and cultural groups in Botswana (i.e. Gaborone, the Tswana-dominated capital city, Malolwane, a rural Tswana-dominant village, and Etsha, a rural HamBukushu village whose residents came to Botswana as refugees from Angola), to examine the relationships among rural and urban residence, mother tongue, and ethnicity in literacy acquisition, practice, and economic access. Conducted in the tradition of practice-based research, the ethnography focuses on the role of literacy in "the little routines people enact, again and again, in working, eating, sleeping, and relaxing, as well as the little scenarios of etiquette they play out again and again in social interaction" and contextualizes literacy skills and instruction within the lives of Botswana's most marginalized individuals (Ortner 1984: 154). Data collected in observations of everyday literacy practices and government- and church-sponsored literacy classes, formal and informal interviews with literacy program staff, learners, graduates, non-participants, small and large business owners, village officials, and university and government representatives, and archival reviews details the literacy demands in the lives of men who have yet to participate fully in organized learning initiatives and women who make up more than half of the literacy participants, and documents how they negotiate the tasks of literacy and numeracy they encounter, how their language dominance relates to their becoming literate in Setswana, and what participating in, dropping out of, or completing the program means to them.

While several previous evaluations had been conducted on Botswana's literacy program, this prior research had assumed a re-tooling approach, neither focusing on literacy practice and meaning nor questioning the relationship between literacy, access, and empowerment. The evaluations had consisted in large part of surveys of learners and conversations with government

[1] According to the 1996 Literacy Census, 97% of school age children attend school.
[2] The World Bank equates a Middle Income ranking to a GNP per capita of $501 to $6000.

officials that accepted the literacy program as originally designed, and only problemmatized isolated elements of the program (including issues of literacy for what and after literacy what, and a lack of integration among literacy initiatives, income generating activities, adults' formal education opportunities, and English instruction).[3] Based on the assumption that improvements in adults' literacy skills could be accomplished by adding-on to the current initiative, this previous research put forth several strategies, including the publication of books for "newly literate" learners who completed the five primers, the implementation of additional training for LGLs, and and the establishment of reading rooms in villages so that adults could access reading materials, that have subsequently been adopted by the program. The only theoretical work on Botswana's literacy program to date has been that of Frank Youngman, at the University of Botswana, who examined the program's role in the reproduction of social inequities. Youngman (1994: 2) provides a critical analysis of the relationships among "the state, adult literacy policy, and inequality in Botswana." He analyzed the program's pedagogy, language policy, and its relationship to what he calls the "social order" (i.e. economic status, ethnicity, and gender), and through that analysis argued that in Botswana the "provision of literacy [is] a means of dominant classes securing their legitimacy within society rather than ...an opportunity for individuals to acquire particular skills." While Youngman's work is unique in its relating practice to social theory, within his paradigm of *political economy*, learners are positioned as disempowered victims, and teachers and supervisory staff as unsuspecting cogs in a social machine. He leaves no room for agency, telling us nothing about what people are doing, nor how "actors manipulate, interpret, legitimize, and reproduce the patterns ... that order their social world (Collier and Rosaldo 1981: 311). Ethnography, however, moves beyond evaluation in its documentation of cultural practice and meaning (Erickson 1990). From what people do and what the doing means to them to a theoretical framework that explains the relationship between human action "and some global entity which we may call *the system*," the ethnography on which this paper is based examines the ways in which participants, drop-outs, graduates, and non-participants negotiate literacy and numeracy tasks, the relationships they construct between language dominance and literacy, and the meaning of their participation in, dropping out, or completing the literacy program (Ortner 1984: 148). Through that process, it reveals gaps between project supports and the everyday practices of learners and non-learners, which result in a national initiative incapable of interrupting existing social positions and divisions of labor.

The ethnography documents that in Botswana everyday practice has been and continues to be peripatetic. As a pool of surplus labor for South Africa and Rhodesia, men and women have a long history of working far from home as miners, farm hands, or domestic servants in white

[3] Random surveys of literacy participants across Botswana conducted by faculty at the University of Botswana found that adults who completed the program (that is, successfully completed the fifth primer and passes a literacy and numeracy test) did indeed learn to read and write, at least to a standard four level, and that participants who left the program early often accomplished their literacy goals, whether those goals were to write their names or write letters to family members living outside the country. (Gaborone, Mutanyatta and Youngman 1988).

dominated economies while maintaining kinship ties, a residence, and farming plot back in Botswana. Post apartheid and its racially-based conomics, most men and women continue to lead a traditional lifestyle, moving between village, "the lands," the Delta, and urban environments to plow, gather grass for thatching, work, and look for work, with residences in several of these different locations. As subsistence farmers, they utilize "multiple survival strategies" in order to support themselves and their families in a country in which rain falls infrequently and drought is a common occurrence. Within this context, literacy is functional. It is a tool that enables men and women to cope with the tasks, challenges, and opportunities they encounter in an ever encroaching cash-based economy. But these demands differ by context. In the capital, Gaborone, men and women enrol in literacy classes because they encounter text in their work as security guards, domestic help, and laborers in wholesale outlets. "After I got a job I got the idea of coming here [to a literacy class], because there's too much documentation," a learner in a class in West Gaborone explained. "Signing the check, I could only put a cross. –There's still some difficulty. I can scribble my name on paper."

Men and women in rural villages participate in literacy classes so they can read letters from family members working in the mines or as domestics in South Africa, to decipher prices of items in shops, and to sign for government farming subsidizes and identity documents. As a ward headman in Etsha, attending a church-sponsored literacy group conducted in his native Thimbakushu, explained:

> When I go to get arable money I have to use my thumb and I don't like that. Government people don't like it. When a person comes they give you a pen. If you say you can't, they say ok, use a thumb, but next time you must learn to write your name. There are literacy classes here. You must go and learn to write your name.

And a woman living in Maiolwane, just 30 km. from the border with South Africa, asserted, "Sometimes I receive letters I want to read for myself. For a passport, I wanted to sign."

Related to this notion of literacy as tool is the desire of many Setswana-speakers to learn English, the language of the educated, of commerce, and of access. "The Managing Director of my company is from Somalia. He speaks English. Even now I'm suffering ... whenever we talk at work, an interpreter must be behind me," complained a learner in Gaborone. Likewise, non-Setswana speakers viewed Setswana as the language of dominance and access, and they participated in literacy classes in order to learn more Setswana. "I didn't take classes in Thimbakushu [the local language of the HamBukushu in Etsha] because I knew Thimbakushu. I wanted to improve my Setswana," explained a learner whose first language was Thimbakushu. But while literacy practices in all languages are functional for both the rural and urban poor, the

need to either read or write is minimal. Botswana's "Ikang Gompieno" ("Daily News"), a small daily newspaper, is not available outside the capital, and virtually no one in either rural or urban communities owns books. The literacy program is in fact the only source of books in the communities, and its primers are the only reading material most individuals own. "I have only these books I obtained from class," explained one learner. Another asserted, "I don't know of anyone who has a book."[5] Botswana is still an oral society, and information in large part is still transmitted orally. Not even university educated Batswana read to learn.

Yet despite the learners' simple, straightforward demands, Botswana's literacy program has had difficulty meeting their needs. Institutionalized without any substantive changes to its original design, Botswana's literacy program looks the same as it did in 1980. First implemented to teach 250,000 men, women, and out of school youth to "become literate in Setswana and numerate" within a period of six years, this initial time frame gave the effort the feel of a literacy campaign, in which teachers were volunteers from the community who received a very small stipend for their work, and literacy classes were held under trees, in back of houses, or in primary schools after school hours. Sixteen years into its campaign mode, the program itself provides far less than what learners need or deserve. Meeting conditions, for instance, have become unacceptable. Most classes continue to meet outside, where the wind blows teaching materials out of reach, rain cancels classes, and lack of chairs and tables makes writing difficult. Classes that are held inside meet in borrowed rooms with poor lighting and broken furniture. Classes start and stop often without notice or explanation, in large part because no professional role exists for LGLs. Still considered voluntary, individuals who have taught for 16 years are paid the same as an LGL who began teaching last week. And so they cancel class when more important concerns arise. When they move to the lands for the plowing season, and at other times because they find more lucrative work. Despite the government's creation of Village Reading Rooms (VRRs) in some villages that consist of three locked metal cabinets of books housed in a primary school classroom, books remain inaccessible to adults in both cities and villages. Only school children are comfortable searching out the reading room assistant at her home and perusing the shelves of the small cabinets. And only school children have come to view reading as an activity to be enjoyed. In addition, adult learners still have no way of accessing the formal educational system once they complete the primers, and efforts to increase income generating activities are far more accessible to LGLs than to learners.

A few senior LGLs, women who view their teaching as their mission have attempted to close some of these gaps on their own. The best have created a community for adults to learn

[5] Not only are books scarce, but the ones that are available are in English. The national library in Gaborone for instance, contains 39,302 books, but an informal count revealed that only 123 (or .3%) were in Setswana.

together. "Everyone is working on reading and writing here," explained a learner in Gaborone. "Everyone seems to have the same idea about literacy. That's why everyone works hard." The adult learners of these LGLs write and perform songs and skits about learning, and act as advocates for adult education within their community. One class has adopted class uniforms to mark themselves as serious learners, and one LGL has even spearheaded an effort to construct an elder school and reading room with money from the government in the form of drought relief subsidizes. But even these most committed LGLs, however, voiced frustration over their minimal pay, lack of training opportunities, and low status. "I'm not an LGL," the women asserted, "I'm a teacher of adults." Another complained, "I like the job, what is discouraging is they don't promote us like we think they should."

But far too often, LGLs express their frustration in what theorists call acts of everyday resistance. To quote Michael Adas (1986: 108), who wrote about resistance in Southeast Asian villages:

> Everyday resistance refers to what people do short of organized confrontation that reveals disgust, anger, indignation, or opposition what they regard as unjust or unfair actions by others more wealthy or powerful than they. Stated positively, through such resistance people struggle to affirm what they regard as just or fair....They are expressions of people who perceive injustice but for various reasons are unable or unwilling to push for improvements in an organized, direct manner.

Instructors' resistance to their inadequate working conditions is manifested in an impatience with their adult learners, a lack of energy expended in their teaching, in frequent absences, or in abandoning the work completely.

While learners, on the other hand, are also frustrated with the unacceptable meeting conditions, the inconsistency, unreliability, and discontinuity of classes, and the lack of post-literacy educational activities, they do not so much resist what might be perceived as structural inequities, as they view the tension between their desire to learn and the system's inadequacies as one of many binds they face. They act within what Clifford Geertz (1973) called a "strain theory." Living in multiple, complex, and imperfect realities, they negotiate the problems or strains, that they encounter in each, balancing needs and desires, limitations and expectations. The ways that they address literacy varies, depending upon the immediacy of their need to read and write. For some, reading and writing, learning or being in a community of like minded "serious" people outweighs other priorities. These men and women are the literacy program's success stories, the ones who attend classes, regardless of its shortcomings. Others attend when they can, but leave when the demands of plowing, gathering thatching grass, work, or caring

for family members loom large. As Patete, an adult learner for six years in Etsha, explained, "Sometimes I visited my friends, sometimes I stayed home or went to the lands instead of attending classes." These men and women appear either as drop-outs in official literacy records, or as life timers who, because of these breaks and interruptions, extend the time they require to finish the five primers to periods of up to 15 years. Other individuals, men older than 50, for instance, who look after cattle at the cattle post, or the HamBukushu women basket weavers in Etsha, encounter few tasks or opportunities that require literacy skills. They are the men and women who don't participate in literacy classes, and they are the people who continue to thumb instead of signing their names to government subsidy and basket payment receipts. While many assert that they have the "interest to learn," and that their hearts are also "burning to learn," they compose 81%, what Botswana's Central Statistics Office calls the "eligible population who never attended literacy classes."

The implications here speak directly to relationships among adult education, empowerment, and social transformation. Although a few senior teachers attempt to improve Botswana's government sponsored literacy program on their own, given the discrepancy between their personal goal of enlightening students and the reality of the program in which they work, the most they have been able to do is become more responsive to the needs of their adult learners. They improve access to reading materials and provide an encouraging and supportive learning environment and feeling of community. But in a system in which they themselves are disempowered, their ability to empower their students is minimal.

If individuals who have been marginalized from society, the poor, the illiterate, women, are to be empowered through an investment in adult education, empowerment must be deliberate and integral to the program's structure, curriculum, and pedagogy. Botswana's national literacy program illustrates that empowerment is not an accidental by-product, and that literacy, literacy education and empowerment are not synonymous. While learners talked about "moving from darkness," at best, the ability to "see the light" does little more than provide skills to decode text. It does not liberate poor and uneducated people ... from the bonds of ignorance, disease, and hunger." It does not help adults become upwardly mobile, gain political consciousness, access additional resources, or even participate in the formal educational system. Participation in the country's national literacy program competes with the many other demands placed upon Botswana's adults in their everyday struggles to feed themselves and their families. And for the 81% of the eligible population who have never attended literacy classes, that participation remains a poor contender (Central Statistics Office 1996).

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